

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Today, the opportunity for education reform in Tennessee is greater than it has been in the last twenty years and greater than it will likely be for the next twenty years. As Tennesseans, we have an obligation to seize this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

As many Tennesseans have realized, the world has changed. Gone are the days when students could drop out of high school and get a good job on a farm or complete high school and get a good job at the factory. Traditional blue-collar manufacturing jobs are being outsourced to countries like China, India, and Mexico and replaced by jobs in services, healthcare, telecommunications, and high-tech industries that require a higher level of education and skill. The state's newest manufacturers—Volkswagen, Wacker Chemical Plant, and Hemlock Semiconductor—require a highly skilled workforce. Volkswagen representatives have repeatedly said the company is adamant about hiring individuals who possess at least an associate's degree.¹ For Tennessee's children to succeed in today's world and in the future, the state must develop a world-class education system.

Tennessee has a long way to go in achieving this goal. Today, Tennessee ranks 41st on national achievement tests, behind all other Southeastern states except Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. On these same assessments, 77 percent of Tennessee 8th graders score below proficient in math and 75 percent score below proficient in reading.² Of every 100 Tennessee ninth graders, only 72 will graduate high school within four years and only 17 will graduate college within six years of leaving high school.³ As Tennesseans continue to struggle with the current economic downturn, it is those with less education who are suffering the most. Since 2006, the unemployment rate rose by 10 percent for individuals without a high school diploma, whereas it only rose by 2 percent for individuals with a college degree. In 2008 alone, nearly 28,000 Tennessee students dropped out of high school. Only 22 percent of Tennesseans over the age of 25 have a bachelor's degree.⁵ These statistics are troubling for our state and even more troubling for our children.

However, there are at least three pieces of good news. First, we know where Tennessee needs to be, and we can measure our progress toward this goal. Workforce projections show that over the next ten years 63 percent of Tennesseans will need either a two- or four-year postsecondary degree in order to meet the needs of employers. Today, only 27 percent of Tennesseans have such a degree. According to research, the best way to predict whether high school students will receive a two- or four-year postsecondary degree is by students' ACT scores. If students score a 21 or above on the ACT, they are much more likely to complete a postsecondary degree than if they score below 21. This means we need 63 percent of our students scoring at least a 21 on the ACT within ten years in order to meet the needs of the state's employers. Today, only 48 percent of Tennesseans taking the test are doing so—we have a long way to go.⁶

The second good piece of news is that Tennessee is poised to undertake meaningful education reform that can help the state meet this 63 percent goal. Among the reasons Tennessee is well positioned are:

- The Tennessee Diploma Project is creating a sense of urgency among educators, parents, and students that something must be done to improve our schools.

- Tennessee is a strong candidate to receive significant competitive funding from both the federal government and national foundations.
- The General Assembly and State Board of Education are ready to take on a meaningful education reform agenda.
- Business and community leaders from across the state are committed to advocating and supporting bold education reform efforts.
- Superintendents, principals, and teachers are eager to help their students succeed and are willing to make the changes necessary for this to occur.
- Parents want their children to succeed, and students are willing to work hard if the community sets high expectations for them.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, SCORE has been working for the past nine months to develop a plan for improving Tennessee's education system. Led by a steering committee of 25 education, political, business, and community leaders from across the state, SCORE has spent the last nine months talking with educators, parents, students, policy experts, and state and local elected officials to learn about the challenges facing our schools and the solutions different schools and districts are using to address these challenges. Through its eight statewide meetings, over 60 town hall meetings, hundreds of one-on-one conversations, and extensive research, SCORE has gathered input from all stakeholders across the state.

Utilizing this input, this report lays out a detailed roadmap for how Tennessee schools can become #1 in the Southeast within five years. This roadmap contains four key strategies:

- Embrace high standards
- Cultivate strong leaders
- Ensure excellent teachers
- Utilize data to enhance student learning

The following pages contain more than sixty detailed recommendations for pursuing these four strategies. These detailed recommendations include the following transformational ideas:

- Tennesseans must embrace the state's more rigorous assessments and higher academic standards. Everyone from state legislators to school boards to superintendents to parents must help create a culture of high expectations for students.
- Teachers must be given the support they need to elevate classroom instruction to meet these higher expectations. Critical to this effort is enabling schools to create professional learning communities that provide opportunities for teachers to learn from one another and work together to improve their teaching.
- We must recruit the best and brightest into teaching by ensuring traditional teacher preparation programs focus more energy on recruitment and by expanding high-quality alternative licensure programs, especially programs focused on recruiting teachers in shortage areas such as math and science. We must ensure we keep the best teachers in the profession by fundamentally rethinking our evaluation, tenure, and compensation systems and connecting them to student learning.

- The number of high-quality district and school leaders must be increased by creating a statewide leadership initiative focused on enhancing the scope and quality of existing leadership training programs.
- Data must be used on a continual basis and managed in a way that allows educators to differentiate instruction and provide low-performing students with more time on task.
- High school graduates must be provided more pathways for transitioning into the workplace or postsecondary education. Critical to increasing these pathways is identifying low-cost ways to expand e-learning, dual enrollment, dual credit, early college high schools, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate courses.

The following pages detail these and other recommendations, all of which are practical, achievable, and high-impact. Recognizing these are tough budget times for state government, all these recommendations can be implemented without any new state funding in the short term, although four priorities for additional long-term state funding are identified. Members of SCORE's Steering Committee are already coming together with business and philanthropic leaders to raise the private-sector funds necessary to provide start-up funding to implement many of these recommendations.

When successfully implemented, this roadmap will make Tennessee schools #1 in the Southeast within five years, as measured by multiple metrics including the percent of students scoring a 21 or above on the ACT. Achieving this goal will not be easy—it will require everyone working together. Whether you are a school board member, state legislator, school leader, teacher, parent, or student, we urge you to turn to the section of this report addressed to you and consider what you can do to help improve our schools. Working together, we can meet our goal of being #1 in the Southeast within five years and, in so doing, ensure that all Tennessee children receive the education they deserve.

¹ Public Education Foundation. (2009, January 28). Volkswagen Interview with Jill Bratina. Retrieved from <http://pefchattanooga.org/tabid/358/Default.aspx#epod>.

² National Center for Education Statistics. (2007). National Assessment of Educational Progress: The Nation's Report Card. [Data File]. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

³ The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. (2006). Student Pipeline—Transition and Completion Rates from 9th Grade to College. Retrieved from www.higheredinfo.org.

⁴ Calculated Risk Finance & Economics. (2009, June). Unemployment Rate and Level of Education. Retrieved from <http://www.calculatedriskblog.com/2009/06/unemployment-rate-and-level-of.html>.

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau. (2007). Current Population Survey: Annual Social and Economic Supplement.

⁶ O*Net OnLine, EMSI data provided by TVA, TN Department of Labor, U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, WorkKeys.

Note: This report includes high-leverage, far-reaching recommendations for improving K-12 student achievement in Tennessee. As such, there are a range of specific topics it does not address (e.g., special education, Pre-K, art and music education). SCORE looks forward to being a part of future discussions on these specific issues.

